

Biblical Women & Intercultural Learnings

by Lois Voeltz

The following four Bible studies, included in a workbook/DVD entitled *Living and Learning: Heart to Heart*, were written for the Lutheran Women Missionary League (lwml.org). The manual was created to provide intercultural learning experiences that help build positive relationships in a multi-cultural world. Dr. Jan Westrick is the primary author of the manual. The Bible studies, written by Lois Voeltz, are being used with their permission.

#1

Introduction:

Unless you are of Jewish decent and background, the Bible is a stage for observing a different culture than our own. The study of stories in the Bible is an intercultural learning experience. As you read the Biblical stories, look for clues to the culture of the character. Observe behaviors that are unique to a non-Jewish culture. Watch for conversations in the text that caused some problems or misunderstandings amongst those listening. Then examine how God worked through the people's different cultures to deepen relationships between people and their relationship with a loving grace-filled God.

1. List at least ten Bible stories and their non-Jewish (Gentile) characters.
2. Identify the cultural problems between the characters or misunderstandings that occurred in the stories you chose.
3. What are ways that God worked through these cultural encounters and experiences that informed or deepened the people's relationship with a loving grace-filled God?
4. By using maps from Biblical times or a concordance, list at least ten non-Jewish countries that are mentioned in the Bible.

#2

Intercultural Learning: The process of increasing awareness and understanding of one's own culture and other cultures around the world.

Hagar, the Egyptian

Genesis 16; 21:9-17; 25:12

Introduction:

If you have ever moved to a different part of the country or the world, you recognize the challenges of being "the new person on the block." You need to learn "the way we do things around here" (our working definition for *culture*.) We listen closely, observe, and often ask questions how daily life is lived in the community. What are the social practices, the shared common beliefs? Then we seek shared experiences with the local people. Hagar, an Egyptian, was the "newcomer" and had the difficult task of learning how to fit into Sarah and Abraham's culture.

Cultural Setting for this story:

Some scholars teach that this Biblical story took place about 2000 BC. Looking into Egyptian life at that time in history we would see the pyramids, the Sphinx, hieroglyphics, a written language, books of poetry and prose, a trading culture and organized government.

There are several historical traditions about Hagar's background. One is that she was a princess, a daughter of the Pharaoh, and chose to go live with Abraham and Sarah, after they had visited Egypt. "Better to be a handmaiden in the tents of Abraham than a princess in this palace." The more traditional idea is that Hagar was a slave-girl and a gift from the Pharaoh to Sarah. The Pharaoh was enamoured with Sarah, when Abraham and Sarah visited Egypt. Abraham told the Pharaoh that Sarah was his half-sister because he was fearful for his life. (Genesis 12:10-20) Either way, Hagar left her home country and lived in the area of Shechem. Her name means *flight* or *alien/immigrant*.

Since Sarah could not conceive a child, she gave Abraham her slave-girl and Hagar became pregnant. "It's the way we do things around here." The Sumero-Babylonian law said, in a clause from Hammurabi's Code: *If she has given a maid to her husband and she has borne children and afterwards that maid has made herself equal with her mistress, because she has borne children her mistress shall not sell her for money, she shall reduce her to bondage and count her among the female slaves.* Isn't it interesting how human nature often complicates the law!

With these cultural understandings, think about the following questions, using the Biblical texts as a guide.

1. What kind of adjustments would Hagar have to make as a result of her move from Egypt to the various homes of Abraham and Sarah?

Genesis 12:10-13:2

2. Using an internet search engine or history books, identify the cultural setting in Egypt at the time of this story.
3. How do you think Hagar felt when was given to Abraham as a 'concubine?'

What does the text say Hagar felt when she got pregnant?

What would happen with the relationships between these three people as a result of the cultural acceptance of two women and one man in a household?

Genesis 16:1-6

#3

Intercultural Awareness: the ability to recognize four perspectives in relationship to a different culture.

1. Looking at your own culture from the point of view of your own culture

2. Being aware of how your culture is viewed by other countries or cultures

3. Being aware and understanding what people from another culture think of their own culture

4. Being aware of how you see the other culture

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The Canaanite Woman from Syrophoenicia

Matthew 15:21-28

Mark 7:24-30

Introduction:

Can you remember a time in your life when you asked another person for something that was very important to you but the person didn't respond as you had hoped? How did that feel? Can you recall the reasons for this helpless and uncomfortable feeling that then occurred between you and the person? Did you pursue the issue with the person or just leave it and go away? With those feelings in mind, read the story of the encounter between the Canaanite woman and Jesus.

The cultural setting for this story:

Tyre and Sidon were two agriculturally-lush seaport cities on the coast of Phoenecia (today known as Lebanon.) The citizens of the cities were artisans, makers of purple dye, sea-traders, and built temples dedicated to Astarte, Dagon and Baal. Tyre became known in Ezra's day as a "city of renown, peopled by men of the sea." (Ezra 26:17) The Matthew and Mark texts tell us that Jesus needed some "get-away quiet time," away from the growing crowds that were attracted to Him. There wasn't a better place to go than to a seaside resort in Gentile country, a home for many Canaanites.

Traditionally, the Canaanites were from Ham's ancestral line, Genesis 10:6-20, son of Noah, and the Hebrews were from Shem's ancestral line, Genesis 10:21-30, also a son of Noah. The Hebrews were instructed (Exodus 33:2) to drive the Canaanites out of the land that was promised by God to the Hebrews. The culture clash between the Canaanites and Jews/People of Israel/Hebrews was based upon generations of family stories and mistrust of each other. Sound familiar?

Read the stories in **Matthew 15: 21-28** and **Mark 7:24-30**, keeping in mind the cultural setting and culture beliefs of both groups of people. (It's important to note that each writer of the Gospels had a different perspective of the events that surrounded Jesus life and as a result, these stories are not exactly alike.)

1. What titles did the Canaanite woman use for Jesus that showed her honour and respect for Him?

What could be some reasons she would use these titles when addressing Jesus?

Matthew 15:22, 25; Mark 7: 28

2. Jesus identifies His culture to the woman when the woman asks help for her daughter. How does He explain Himself?

Matthew 15:24

Jeremiah 50:6

Ezekiel 34:6

Matthew 9:36

3. This Gentile woman crossed a cultural barrier by even talking to Jesus as well as asking Jesus for help. They get into an interesting conversation where both speakers continued to “stand their ground.” What was Jesus’ quick reply to the woman’s request to help her daughter?

Matthew 15:26 and Mark 7:27

4. Notice how the Jewish disciples respond to the Canaanite woman and her request. **Matthew 15:23**

5. The woman knows the cultural bias of these people “from the south.” Yet she knows there’s something different about this Hebrew man and continues her dialogue with Jesus. What is her response to Jesus?

What does it tell us about this woman?

Matthew 15:27 and Mark 7:28

6. Jesus affirms the woman and her faith. What are some we lessons can we learn from Jesus’ reply?

Matthew 15:28 and Mark 7:29-30

#4

An interculturally effective person is someone who is able to live contentedly and work successfully in another culture.

1. There is an ability to communicate with people of another culture in a way that earns their respect and trust.

2. There is the capacity to adjust personally so the person is content and generally at ease in the host culture.

The Samaritan Woman at Jacob’s Well

John 4:7-42

Introduction:

Can you think back to a time in your life when you felt ridiculed and or even ostracized? Remember when you were playing on the playground in kindergarten and a girl that was older than you came up and said: "Pam's dress is much prettier than yours is." Or maybe it was in 5th grade when girls in your class wouldn't talk to you at lunch or recess for a reason you never did learn. Then there's the experiences in junior high and high school where your so-called friends had gathered together and would stop talking as soon as you entered the room. As an adult, have you ever felt left out? If so, try to bring back those uncomfortable feelings to your head and heart as you re-read the story of the Samaritan woman in John 4:7-42. This woman was fetching water from Jacob's Well at noon. Women from her village would gather at the well early in the day to talk and share news. But this woman came at noon. She was 'left-out', ostracized, and alone. Yet when this stranger, a male Jew came to the well, she showed she was also caring, religious, courageous, direct and strong woman.

The cultural setting for this story:

The cultural differences between the Samaritans and the Jews resulted from an historic war generations before Jesus and this woman met at Jacob's Well. The Assyrians had conquered and settled in Northern Israel from 726-721 B.C. and married the local Jews that stayed behind. The Assyrians brought their religious beliefs with them and the Jewish/Assyrian people, now known as Samaritans, incorporated the local Jewish traditions and beliefs into their religious practices. During Jesus' time, devout Jews that had to travel from Jerusalem to the region of Galilee would often alter their route not to have to go through Samaritan territory. Also, during the 1st Century in the Mid-eastern region, the cultural traditions between men and women dictated that men and women did not speak socially in public and would never discuss religion.

With these cultural understandings, think about the following questions, using the Biblical texts as a guide.

1. Why did Jesus talk to the Samaritan woman at Jacob's Well?

1 Samuel 16:7 – Samuel choosing a king for Israel.

Acts 10:28 – Peter at the home of Cornelius

2. What cultural barriers was Jesus crossing?

II Kings 17:21-41

Nehemiah 4

Luke 9:51-56

John 4:27

Jewish practice and tradition in the 1st Century:

Eliezer, a first-century rabbi, stated: "Rather should the words of the Torah be burned than entrusted to a woman... Whoever teaches his daughter the Torah is like one who teaches her lasciviousness."

The Talmud states: "Let a curse come upon the man who (must needs have) his wife or children say grace for him."

There was a three-fold thanksgiving in the daily prayers of Jews: "Praised be God that he has not created me a gentile; praised be God that he has not created me a woman; praise be God that he has not created me an ignorant man."

3. What cultural barriers was the Samaritan woman crossing? ("This is the way we do things in Sychar!")

John 4:6-7

John 4: 19-20 2 Kings 17:24-33

John 4:17-18

4. The conversation between the Samaritan woman and Jesus shows that they gained respect for each other as the conversation continued. Identify some of those phrases that show these qualities of respect and trust.

a. How did the woman respond to the theological conversation with Jesus?

John 4:28-29

b. How did the woman's neighbors respond to her story about her encounter with Jesus?

John 4: 39-42